

# CH'AN NEWS LETTER

No. 85 May, 1991

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## Mind and Dharma Dust

(Lecture delivered by Master Sheng-yen on Sunday, April 19, 1987)

### LEVEL ONE

In my talks on the Surangama Sutra I have been speaking of the twelve ayatanas, or entries, which refer to the six sense organs and the six sense objects. An entry refers to a point or a position at which something can be specified or at which contact can be made.

Today I will deal with the mind and its object, which comprise the eleventh and twelfth entries. Actually, the mind's object can also be translated as "the dust of the senses" or "dharma dust." Dharma is a word often used to describe the mind's object. This "dharma" is not to be confused with Buddhist teachings or the underlying laws of the universe. Dharma can have many meanings. Here it refers to thoughts, ideas, mental images.

Let's begin with the sense organ of the mind. In the West the functions of the mind are usually described as consciousness, thought and willpower. Many people consider these activities to be purely mental. Others, relying on Western medicine, characterize these phenomena as attributes of the nervous system.

For example, there are drugs which stimulate hormonal secretions and thereby affect the nervous system. Other drugs, such as narcotics, inhibit the functioning of the nervous system. In China, acupuncture is used to achieve similar results. Today those whose mental illness might once have been thought hopeless can be cured by such methods.

Some people consider the functioning of the mind to be a purely mental, non-physical activity. But if that were absolutely true, how could you increase or decrease someone's intellectual responses by the physical introduction of drugs or other chemicals? Where does the mental realm end and the physical begin? What do you think about this?

When I was a child, I was quite slow-witted. In fact, I didn't begin to talk until I was about eight years old. Consequently, when I left home to become a monk, I had great difficulty in reading the sutras. I couldn't memorize anything. My master told me, "You really are a stupid fool." He said that my karmic obstructions were heavy and that only by prostrating 500 times a day to the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara could I succeed in removing them.

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I did as my master said for three months until one day my head felt calm and cool. It seemed to have opened up and everything that had weighed me down for so long seemed to have been lifted. From that time on I had no trouble memorizing or reciting verses from the sutras. My master said that this was the Bodhisattva responding to me. I believe that this is the case, and therefore this function was purely mental in that the Bodhisattva intervened and helped me.

But some years ago I spoke to some people about this and they had a different theory. They thought that my increased mental powers had nothing to do with the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. They said that I had been unhealthy when I arrived at the monastery and therefore my *ch'i*, or life force, was unable to flow properly through my body. According to this line of reasoning, the prostrations simply served as an exercise to open up the central meridian in my body to allow the proper flow of *ch'i*. People who engage in this *ch'i* practice say that when they have increased the flow of *ch'i* through their central meridian, then they, too, will have increased wisdom. I respect such people, and if there are any of you here who feel that you are somewhat slow-witted, you might want to consult a *ch'i* master to help open up your central meridian.

When we speak of the sense organ of the mind, we refer to the brain as it is understood in Western medicine. It is in the brain cells that all our previous experiences are stored. From these we base our judgements and we form the associations of memory. We might compare this to data stored in a computer. Just as the computer's memory might be damaged and cause data loss, memory can be lost if the brain is damaged sufficiently. Accordingly, since the sense organ of this life dies, you will not be able to remember what has happened to you in this life in your next life. Of course remembrance of past lives might be possible for someone who has developed supernormal powers, but this is an issue which we will not explore today.

Thus the sense organ of the mind is something physical. It includes the cells in our brain and the nerves in our body, which all function through an accumulation of information and experience upon which we base our judgement and actions. We know that forms, shapes, and images are the objects of the eye, sounds are the object of the ear, etc. What then are the objects of the sense organ of the mind? Our experiences are recorded through symbols, mental images, sounds, and the notations of language. These are the sense objects, and they fall into three categories: good, evil, and neutral. They are stored in the sense organ of the mind, and collectively these symbols, sounds, and ideas are referred to as dharma dust, as we stated earlier.

We know that for the function of the mind to arise there must be a sense consciousness in addition to a sense organ and a sense object. Without the addition of consciousness, we are simply talking about the twelve entries, which are basically associated with the physical world. This would be the level of a materialist, who holds that only matter exists. What then would a materialist say about a young person who died in an accident. The brain cells might be intact, but of what could they be conscious? What happens to the memories and experiences contained in those cells?

In recent times many organ transplants have become possible, including kidneys, lungs, and even the heart. What about the brain? Could that be transplanted, and if it were, whose memory would it contain, the donor or the recipient?

Imagine if part of my brain were damaged and as a remedy part of Nagendra's brain was grafted on to mine. When I remember something, will the memories be mine or will they sometimes be Nagendra's? Will I think of myself as Shih-fu or as Nagendra? Will I recognize some of his friends whom I've never met if I see them on the street? Would I have a claim on his bank account? If he had been married, would I think that his wife were mine?



Such discussions of the brain and memory are still rooted very much in materiality. But for those who practice Dharma there is another question: what role does memory play in the karma that moves us from rebirth to rebirth? What is the connection between the physical and the mental, or spiritual?

It is true that someone with supernormal powers may perceive the workings of karma, but those without such powers cannot know how karma functions from their own experience. The sutra speaks about the causal relationship that relates one lifetime to another, about cause and consequence. But if we are really to try to understand karma, we must not confine ourselves to the material, but we must also include the six sense consciousnesses.

Note that even though we talk about six sense consciousnesses, there is really only one consciousness. To explain consciousness' functioning, we speak of the first five consciousnesses, eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body, which relate to the physical world, and the sixth consciousness, which relates to the mental world. But really what we call the sixth consciousness includes the first five consciousnesses as well as the seventh and eighth consciousness, which relate to self-centeredness and the storing of previous karma, and which I will discuss shortly. Nonetheless, despite the numbering and division into categories, there is in truth only one consciousness.

Now I will discuss the three categories of functions associated with consciousness. The first category comprises cognition, judgement, and decision. These functions are directly related to the sense organ of the brain and they comprise what can be called the "sixth consciousness in the narrow sense."

The next two categories relate not so much to the physical organ of the brain as to the mind itself. The first of these, the seventh consciousness, relates to self-centeredness. The next, the eighth consciousness, is the storehouse of all previous karma. The seventh consciousness is actually an awareness of

the eighth consciousness. It is this ego function which keeps us in the cycle of births and deaths, and which causes the eighth consciousness to be transmitted from one life to the next. The "sixth consciousness in the narrow sense" disappears at death. Only these latter two continue.

To really know the deepest functioning of consciousness (what we have described as the eighth consciousness) you have to attain Buddhahood. Even arhats are not aware of the eighth consciousness. They can be aware, however, of the seventh consciousness because that is the aspect of consciousness that holds on to the sense of self. Arhats are free from the cycle of birth and death, and therefore free from the sense of self. When you reach arhatship you can be aware of the seventh consciousness.

Let us return to the three kinds of symbols we spoke of earlier: the good, the evil, and the neutral. These are the three kinds of dharma dust. By what criteria do we establish these categories of good, evil and neutral? This may seem to be subjective. Is what is good for one person good for another? Is there a "common" consensus to tell us into what category something should fall? Would this be the same for Americans, Chinese, Indians, women, and men? It is simply impossible for human beings to come to a consensus regarding these categories. This is because we are too self-centered and we cannot arrive at unbiased conclusions. This is why we must rely on the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha does not see anything as either good, evil, or neutral. He is free of self-centeredness and only uses these categories for sentient beings so that we can make progress and eventually reach Buddhahood ourselves. It is for our benefit that Buddha classifies the various acts of body, mind, and speech in terms of good, evil, and neutral.

Something that happened in Taiwan makes an interesting test case of how you might classify another's actions. There was a policeman who was on the run because he was wanted for murder. He had killed



someone he believed to be evil. But he knew he had broken the law, so he took his fiancée and ran away. There was quite a manhunt for them. When they were apprehended at last, the fiancée was asked why she helped and ran away with a murderer. She replied, "My fiancé is the most wonderful person in the world. He hasn't done anything wrong. The one he killed was wrong. He was evil and he deserved to die. If what my fiancé did was wrong, then the laws have to be changed." However, the wife of the murdered man obviously had a different opinion. She said, "The law is the law. This is a cop who is supposed to uphold the law. He deserves to be punished."

It is true that many people disliked the man who was killed. Many thought that he deserved to die. But whether this is so or not, there is nothing in the law that allows someone to become an executioner because of personal likes or dislikes. How would you judge the policeman? Not according to a legal court, but to the court of Dharma?

The principle of Dharma should not be used to bring confusion to secular law – the laws created by the governments of nations. These laws should be the foundations of society, but the Dharma can be the guiding spirit, or principle, in their formation.

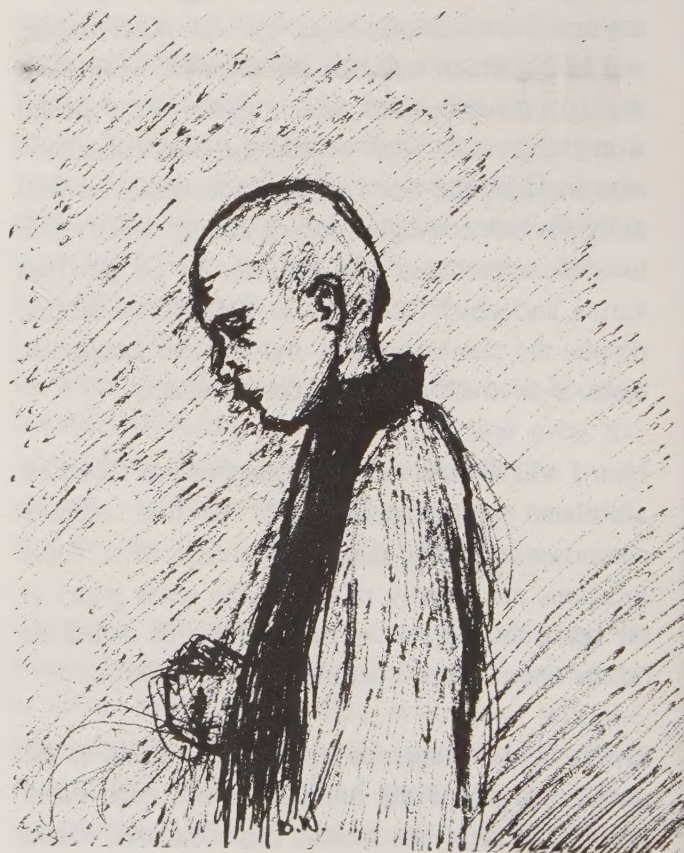
Simply deciding that someone is evil does not give you the right to kill him. This is the case in a disorderly society, one with no laws or governance. The policeman could have brought the man to justice rather than killing him. If he is so judged, then he will die by the law. Individual likes and dislikes are subjective. A misguided person might believe that everyone but himself was evil and try to gun down as many people as he can. Such things do happen.

Since the policeman acted on his own and not in accord with the law, he has broken the law. By

contrast, someone acting as an agent of the government who participates in an execution is generally not committing murder.

There is, of course, another question entirely: whether such harsh laws as the death penalty are fair or not. Just as the policeman's fiancée said, some laws might have to be changed.

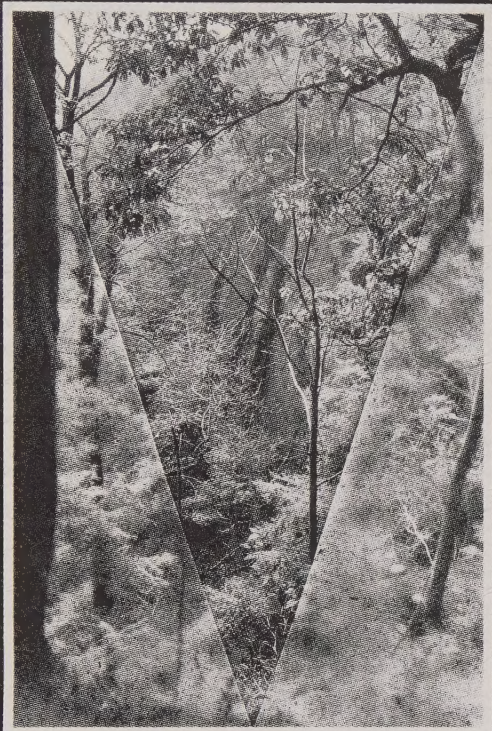
We have discussed the mind and its object and the categories into which these objects fall. It is not important whether or not you understand these passages in the sutra. What is important is practice.



Drawing by Dorothy Weiner



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## News Items

Shih-fu came back to the center on May 7. He is continuing the Wednesday Special Class on the *Heart Sutra*.

Shih-fu will also continue to give the Friday Buddhist Philosophy Class on the *Diamond Sutra*.

There will be a one-day sitting meditation on Saturday, June 8 and July 13 from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. \$10 for members, \$15 for non-members. Meals are included.

## Other Activities for May and June

### Group meditation:

Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Sunday 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and 3 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

**May 12** Sunday lecture on the *Surangama Sutra* by Shih-fu  
1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

**19** Buddha's Birthday Celebration, beginning at 10 a.m.

**June 6** Special Sunday lecture on "The Harmony of the Earth" by Shih-fu  
1:30 p.m. to 3 p.m.

**9** Sunday lecture on the *Surangama Sutra* by Shih-fu  
1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

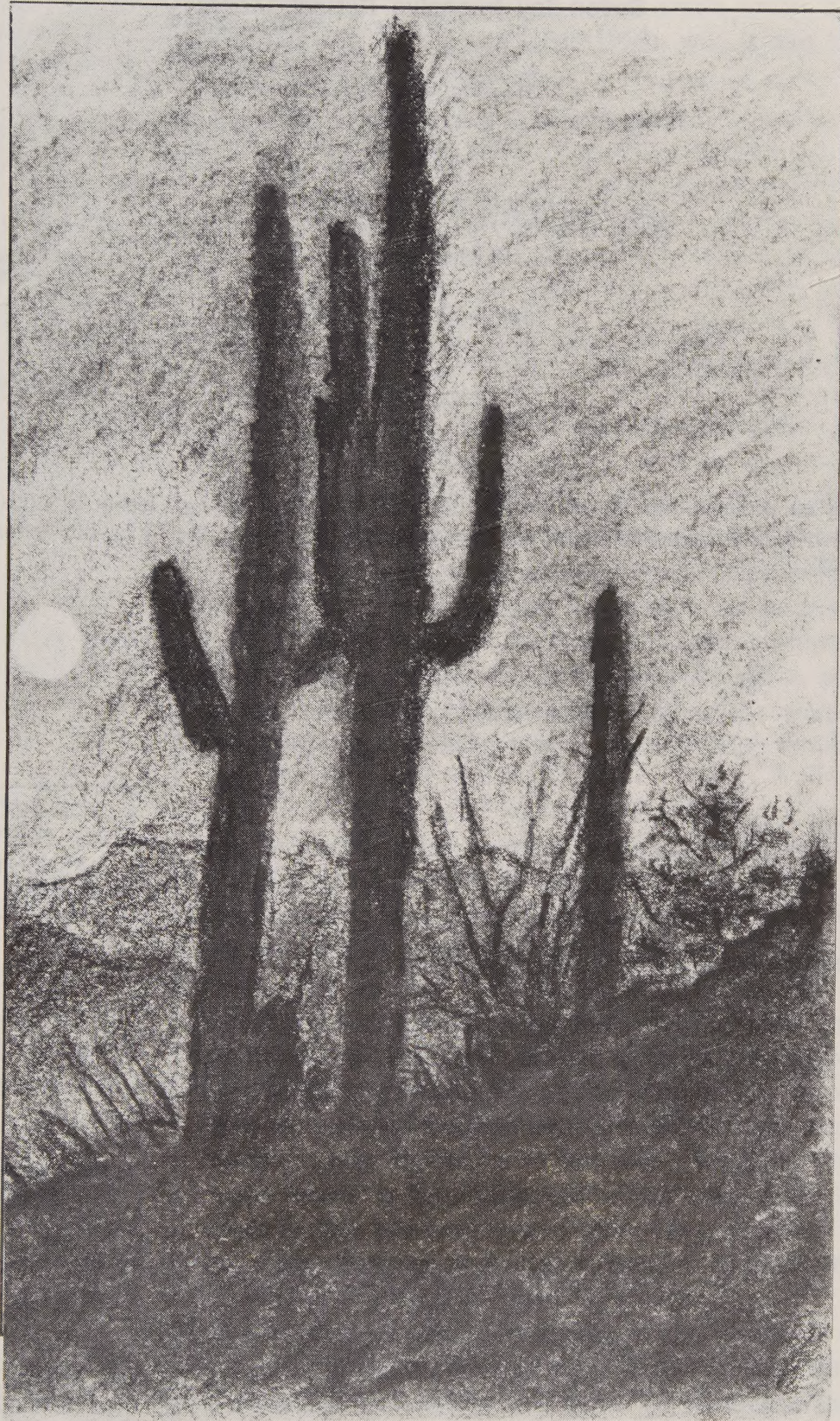
**15** One-day recitation of Buddha's Name

**16** Sunday lecture on the *Surangama Sutra* by Shih-fu  
1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

**22** Beginner's Meditation Class

**23** Sunday lecture on the *Surangama Sutra* by Shih-fu  
1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.





Drawing by Daoud Makso



**Seven-day Intensive Retreat Dates:***Memorial Day Retreat:*

Friday May 24, 7 p.m. to Saturday, June 1, 8 a.m.  
(This retreat is full)

*Independence Day Retreat:*

Friday June 28, 7 p.m. to Friday, June 5, 8 a.m.  
(Waiting list only)

*Thanksgiving Day Retreat*

Friday November 29, 7 p.m. to Friday, December 6, 8 a.m.

*Christmas Retreat*

Wednesday December 25, 7 p.m. to Wednesday January 1, 1992, 8 a.m.

Applications are accepted three months prior to the retreats. Donation for each retreat is \$200.00 for non-members and \$100.00 for members. For more information please contact the Ch'an Meditation Center at (718) 592-6593.

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